

The first woman Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, a mother and grandmother, convened the 110th Congress by announcing: "For all of America's children, the House will be in order." Both the Speaker's words and the image of her surrounded by children that day represent the new Congress's promise and commitment to protect and provide for all of our nation's children.

Central to that promise is addressing the national need for comprehensive health coverage for every child in America. More than nine million children are uninsured in our nation and millions more are underinsured. It is simply unconscionable that in a country as wealthy in resources as the United States there are so many uninsured children – arguably our most vulnerable citizens - without access to the most basic medical services. It is long past time to address this failure and pursue the goal of providing health coverage for all children.

The first action that Congress can take is to reauthorize and fund the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP), a block grant to states that allows them to cover uninsured children who are not eligible for Medicaid but whose family incomes are below 200 percent of the federal poverty line. In the ten years since passage of the bipartisan SCHIP, a number of states have extended coverage to uninsured children. Today, 40 states, including Maryland, and the District of Columbia, cover children through Medicaid or SCHIP, compared to just three before SCHIP was enacted ten years ago. Since its inception, SCHIP has provided quality care for six million children.

Unfortunately, President Bush's 2008 budget proposal shortchanges SCHIP by seven to ten billion dollars, threatening health insurance coverage for millions of low-income children, including 137,000 in the state of Maryland. Meanwhile, the President is moving forward with a push to extend his federal tax cuts for the wealthy. At a time when there are nine million children without health coverage, it is morally unacceptable to cut essential services for children to pay for massive new tax cuts for the rich. I strongly oppose using children's health care funding as an offset for extending these tax cuts and will work to set our priorities straight in the final budget that passes Congress.

The President's budget also proposes troubling restrictions to the SCHIP that would effectively squeeze states in their ability to use federal match funds to maintain coverage for current enrollees and expand the program to include more eligible children. When six million children – or two-thirds of the nine million uninsured – are eligible for either SCHIP or Medicaid but are not enrolled, this is simply the wrong tack to take.

One of the strongest measures of our values and priorities as a society is how well we take care of our most vulnerable citizens. That is why it is imperative to not only reauthorize and fund SCHIP, but also to explore ways to expand coverage and ensure those who are eligible to enroll do so.

Maryland can be sure that I will continue to do my part to fight for children's health care as well as other investments in the next generation. I am proud to have been named this year as one of Congress's Best Representatives for Children by the Children's Defense Fund Action Council (CDAFC). My 100 percent rating on the CDAFC 2006 Scorecard was awarded for my support of investments in children's education and health care and underscores my commitment to protecting the health and well-being of Maryland's children 100 percent of the time. Collectively, the Maryland Congressional Delegation ranked highly among states overall, placing sixth in the nation in its joint defense of children's interests.

I conclude by stating that children's health care is not a partisan issue – it is a matter of morality, human decency, and America's promise to protect all our children equally. Congress has the responsibility and the opportunity to keep that promise. We must reach across party lines and set a bipartisan national goal of investing in children's health care and expanding coverage to the nine million uninsured.